

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND THE IDEAS OF MAHATMA GANDHI: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Gandhi's contribution in India's independence cannot be measured in words. He is widely recognised as the exponents of Ahimsa (non-violence) and peaceful protest. Apart from his contribution to India's independence movement, Gandhi ji went on to address various issues covering all possible dimensions be it personal, social, economic, educational or discrimination faced by the women or the weaker section of the society.

Mahatma Gandhi had expressed his views and had written on numerous issues that concerned the Indian society in particular and humanity in general. Gandhi is one of the most prominent leaders of mankind. As a mass communicator his ideas and views have reached and influenced more people than any other leader of the world. Gandhi's critique of social evils, his consistent efforts for the liberation of women and his immense faith in women's moral strength had a huge impact on women's struggle for their rights and freedom as an integral part of the national struggle for independence. Mahatma Gandhi and his ideas about women empowerment needs to be reviewed in the current scenario. This paper is an attempt to understand Gandhi's views on women empowerment in different dimensions.

Key words: Women Empowerment, Satyagraha, Swaraj, Khadi

I. INTRODUCTION

MK Gandhi was not an academic but was a charismatic leader of the Indian National Movement with the purpose of obtaining India's freedom from the colonial rule and restoring self confidence among the rural population, who makes up more than half of India's population. His economic thoughts mainly centred around rural economy and prioritized man over machines and yet when the movement gathered strength and the goal for independence was turning real, he became accommodative of the roles of entrepreneurs and other participant players of the economy from practical considerations which remained firmly rooted to the core value that economy and ethics were inseparable. For Gandhi, women were not merely an object created to serve the men nor a competitors of men. Rather he viewed both men and women equal who are essentially endowed with the same spirit and faced with the similar problems.

Against this background, the present study broadly tries to understand the Gandhian thought relating to women empowerment. This paper is divided into eight sections. The first section consist of the introduction section, the second section contains the objective of the study. Third section deals with the methodology of the study. In the fourth section we discuss about Women's participation in Gandhi led National movement. The fifth, sixth and seventh section of the paper contains the Gandhian thought of economic, education and social empowerment of women, the eighth and the final section of the paper contains the conclusion of the study.

II. METHODOLOGY

This paper is mainly based on secondary sources. The data has been collected from various literatures available such as books, journals, working paper etc. It tries to review the existing literature on Gandhian thought in relation to women empowerment, economy and education. Mahatma Gandhi has enumerated his ideas and thoughts about women in his book 'Women and Social Injustice'. This book includes all the writings and speeches by Mahatma Gandhi, regarding women and their position in the Indian society. According to Gandhi, the role of women in the political, economic and social emancipation of the country was of prime importance. Gandhi had immense faith in the capability of women to carry on a Non-violent crusade. Under his guidance and leadership, women shouldered critical responsibilities in India's struggle for freedom. Women held public meetings, organized picketing of shops selling foreign alcohol and articles, sold *khadis* and actively participated in national movement. They bravely faced the baton of the police and even went behind the bars. Gandhi's urge to women to join India's struggle for independence was instrumental in transforming the outlook of women.

Women's active participation in the freedom struggle shoulder to shoulder with the man uprooted age old taboos and restrictive customs. Through their participation in Indian struggle for freedom, women of India broke down the shackles of oppression that had relegated them to a secondary position since time immemorial.

III. WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL MOVEMENT

Women actively participated in huge number in the 'mass' movements led by Mahatma Gandhi and this had a huge impact on Indian women's lives and how they were perceived by the general masses. In 1885, the Indian National Congress was founded and during the Bombay session 1889, ten women participated in this session. Although, Gandhi was not vocal about an "active role" for women in the public sphere. However, when the issue of women's voting rights was first raised in 1921, Gandhi supported it and even felt that the success of the *satyagraha* movement and the *Dandi* March was inextricably linked with the active participation of women. During the famous *Dandi* march Gandhi originally started off with 79 *satyagrahis*. People from the villages on route and around spontaneously joined the march. When the procession neared Dandi, there were thousands of people walking with Gandhi. Among them were many women. Burning of foreign cloth and picketing of liquor shops were activities which were predominantly undertaken by women, in vast numbers, rose up to put an end to the destructive aspects of male dominance in society.

The entrance of women in the *satyagraha* struggle gave the movement a new momentum. The women in India threw the purdah and actively participated in the non - violent movement. They manufactured prohibited salt, picketed foreign cloth shops and liquor shops and even tried to wean both the seller and the customer from these. Gandhi chose women for this job because he believed that women had an inherent capacity for non - violence. He felt that the non - cooperation movement of 1921 had partially failed because men had been entrusted with picketing and violence had crept in. This agitation of picketing was to be initiated and controlled exclusively by women. Women's involvement in non - cooperation movement, helped women in finding a new dignity in public life, a new place in the national platform. Gandhi believed in the inner strength of women and he wanted women to acknowledge their inner moral courage so as to a) emancipate themselves from the domination of men and b) participate in the national emancipation.

IV. ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN, KHADI AND GANDHI

Gandhi emphasized upon the economic independence of everyone - both men as well as women. Gandhi believed that economic freedom would play a vital role in the empowerment of women. He consistently inspired and motivated women for spinning yarn and weaving cloth. Once addressing women at Nadiad, in 1919, Gandhi suggested that rather than spending so much time in temples, women should spin for few hours every day. Gandhi was of the opinion that the beads in temples undoubtedly is dharma but real bhakti according to Gandhi was in serving the motherland.

Gandhi did advocate spinning of *khadi* as a means of livelihood for women and a way of combating the declining employment of women, especially in rural areas where such decline followed the destruction of traditional crafts and occupations. However, spinning on the charkha could not, at that juncture, become a viable means of livelihood for most women. As far as the economic emancipation of women was concerned, Gandhi felt that men and women had different spheres of work. In his opinion, women could take to economic activities to supplement the income of her families like spinning, which he believed to be a good option available to the women. In the social realm, Gandhi contemplate a critical role of women in doing away with the forces of communalism, caste system and untouchability.

Gandhi, Education and Women Empowerment:

There is an integrated and inseparable relationship between education and women empowerment. Education enable women to advance and acquire economic stability and raise their social status. According to Gandhi, a woman in the companion to man are gifted with equal mental capacities. She has an equal right to freedom and liberty like men. He further asserted that education for women was the need of the hour which would ensure their moral development and make them capable of occupying the same platform as that of men. Gandhi did not support co - educational institutions. He felt that there must be provision for separate arrangements for the education of women after their attaining a certain age. He also stated that women's education laid much

emphasis on home making and child caring activities and this would not, in any way, equip them for other skills required in the public domain.

Social Empowerment of Women and Gandhi:

The concept of Women empowerment is a global issue and discussion on women's political right is the core issue of many formal and informal campaigns worldwide. Gandhi worked not only for the political emancipation of the nation, but for liberation of all the suppressed sections of society including the women. One of the noteworthy results of his lifework has been the awakening of women, which made them shed their deep rooted sense of inferiority, raised their self esteem and provided them with an opportunity to live a dignified life. Women and *harijans* were rightly seen by Gandhi as the two most depressed groups in Indian society since their disabilities had certain specificities which needed special attention. He made a major contribution towards creating a general climate of sympathetic awareness of women's situation. For Gandhi, "When woman, whom we call *abala* becomes *sabala*, all those who are helpless will become powerful". The welfare of the weaker sections of society was dear to his heart. He had no qualms about the priority of social over political ends. In his opinion, to postpone social reform till after the attainment of Swaraj. Gandhi wanted women being trained in all human activities. Equality between men and women was accepted as one of the objectives in the Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Indian National Congress in 1931. Many women freedom fighter also became active on the issues of women's rights. This period saw the emergence of numerous women's organizations. The Women's India Association (WIA) was founded in 1917 by an Irish and an Indian nationalist Margaret Cousins, the National Council of Indian Women were jailed during their participation in Salt march when Gandhiji urged people to break the salt law by making salt themselves. Thus, women's participation in the national movement helped in breaking several of the old barriers of tradition and custom.

V. CONCLUSION

Women plays a pivotal role in the progress and development of society by participating in the economic, political and socio-cultural practices. Though women in many societies contribute appreciable development inputs, they get unequal benefits and discriminated throughout their life beginning from birth till death. Women's empowerment helps in insure gender equality which is a prerequisite for any nation to develop. India is far ahead in policies and legislation favoring women but most of them are limited to pen and paper. The political system of the country is not able to effectively impliment and integrate the most powerful national and international agendas like gender equality, social justice and the basic human right to live with dignity. We can conclude that the position of woman in India compared to other developed countries is poor. In rural India, woman are still considered as the kitchen bee and their activities are limited within the four walls of the house.

This type of attitude has to be changed. Although in comparison to the early days, at present women are coming out freely and participating in every field. But all talks of women empowerment and gender equality is in void if guided by patriarchal ideas and culture. Gandhi's ideas and view relating to women and their upliftment were progressive which makes Gandhian thoughts relevant at present for empowerment and emancipation of women.

VI. REFERENCES

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